

MINUTES
OF A MEETING OF THE
EXECUTIVE

held on 5 October 2023

Present:

Cllr A-M Barker (Chairman)
Cllr W Forster (Vice-Chair)

Cllr P Graves Cllr E Nicholson
Cllr I Johnson Cllr D Roberts
Cllr L Lyons

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The interest of the Strategic Director – Corporate Resources, Kevin Foster, was referred to in the agenda but it should be noted that Mr Foster was not present at the meeting.

In accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules, the Strategic Director – Communities, Louise Strongitharm, declared a disclosable personal interest (non-pecuniary) in any items concerning the companies of which she was a Council-appointed director. The interests were such that Mrs Strongitharm could advise the Executive on those items.

The interest of the Head of Transformation and Digital, Adam Walther, was referred to in the agenda but it should be noted that Mr Walther was not present at the meeting.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 14 September 2023 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

4. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of Urgent Business under Section 100B(4) of the Local Government Act 1972.

5. QUESTIONS

The Leader reported that a question had been submitted by Mr Brian Matthews under Section 3 of the Executive Procedure Rules regarding disabled swimming facilities. A copy of the question together with the reply was before the Executive. The Leader advised that Mr Matthews had been unable to attend the meeting and would be sent a copy of the reply to his question. The question, together with the reply from the Portfolio Holder, was presented as follows:

Question from Mr Brian Matthews

“Where and when will you let disabled people swim in Woking? Currently you let Dolphins swim club use Pool in the Park Tuesday lunchtime and Friday evening. Perhaps Sheerwater pool? Some physically disabled people cannot move on land but can exercise safely in water. This is essential for our health and mental wellbeing.”

Reply from Councillor Ellen Nicholson

“The Council recognises the significant health and wellbeing benefits of swimming, particularly for our residents with disabilities. The Dolphins group does already use Eastwood Leisure Centre as well as Pool in the Park. Whilst the availability and range of facilities may reduce if the Pool in the Park closes, we really do want to try and protect the most vulnerable.

However, the proposed phased closure of the Pool in the Park is under consideration due to the severe financial position of the Council and the level of subsidy the facility requires. The Council’s position means that we are unable to subsidise non statutory services, and we currently are subsidising Pool in the Park significantly. It is important that residents respond to the public consultation on the future of Pool in the Park, which went live on Monday, 2 October.

Sessions will continue to be available at Eastwood Leisure Centre. The Eastwood Leisure Centre was designed with accessibility in mind and includes a high tech moveable floor and hoist within the teaching pool, flexible use changing facilities, two Changing Places Toilets and wheelchair accessible facilities throughout the building. Thank you again for the question.”

The Leader highlighted that the Executive welcomed questions from members of the public and explained the submission process. The deadline for written questions from members of the public was 12 noon, seven days before the Executive. The next Executive would be held on 16 November 2023, so the deadline for written questions was 12 noon, 9 November 2023. The Leader also reminded everyone that all meetings of Full Council, Executive and Council Committees were open to the public to attend, except on the rare occasion when items of a personal or confidential matter were due to be considered.

6. SHEERWATER REGENERATION EXE23-065

Councillor Forster, Portfolio Holder for Key Projects, introduced the report which provided an update on the Council’s funding request to Government, a summary of the results of the public consultation undertaken over the summer, and the proposals for the remainder of the Sheerwater regeneration area. It was noted that the Council, at its meeting on 20 July 2023, had agreed that the existing Development Agreement between the Council and ThamesWey for the delivery of the Sheerwater regeneration project be brought to an end

and no new phases would commence following those currently under construction. The Portfolio Holder advised that a robust business case had been developed to support the Council's funding request to Government of £57.7 million to complete the three phases – Copper, Red and Yellow – which were currently mid-construction. The outcome of the funding request was due shortly.

The Executive was advised that the Council had received 507 responses to the survey on the future of the Sheerwater regeneration area, a summary of the consultation results was included in Appendix 1 to the report. The views of local residents had been taken into consideration and it was proposed that the Council progressed the refurbishment of circa 106 homes within the regeneration area, including Woodlands Park, Hennessey Court and Spencer Close, along with refurbishment of the sheltered housing at Woodlands House. The Portfolio Holder highlighted that retaining those 106 homes within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) would generate additional net income to the HRA of circa £650,000 per annum from 2024/25. It was proposed that the remaining units in the regeneration area be offered to the market. The Council would work with the private sector and housing associations to ensure any redevelopment fitted the street scene.

Regarding the public consultation, it was highlighted that there had been low satisfaction with recreation facilities, such as Multi-Use Games Area and skate park. Moving forward, it was suggested that this could be considered in the Council's arrangements with housing associations and the private sector to involve the public and meet local needs. Attention was drawn to the under-representation in the consultation of residents from an Asian background and that work was needed to understand the barriers to taking part and to ensure all residents were reached as the process progressed. It was noted that the Portfolio Holder was arranging to visit and speak at Sheerwater Mosque to improve engagement with the Asian community.

The Executive was hopeful that the Government would agree the Council's funding request to complete the three active construction phases, and was supportive of the proposals for the remainder of the Sheerwater regeneration area.

RECOMMENDED to Council

- That (i) the progress on Red, Yellow and Copper phases be noted;**
- (ii) the Council retains and refurbishes circa 106 homes within the Sheerwater Regeneration area as set out in Section 5 of the report;**
 - (iii) the costs of refurbishment, estimated at £2.9 million, be covered by capital receipts and Local Authority Housing Funding (if appropriate);**
 - (iv) the Strategic Director – Communities, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Key Projects, be authorised to agree proposals to consolidate ownership of vacant housing assets between ThamesWey and the Council; and**
 - (v) the residual land and properties within the Sheerwater Regeneration area (excluding those to be retained) continue to be vacated and offered to the market for disposal, as set out in Section 4.7 of the report, to maximise the capital receipt.**

Reason: To enable a sustainable delivery option for the Sheerwater Regeneration project whilst reducing financial risks and exposure to the Council.

7. 2023 REVIEW OF THE WOKING CORE STRATEGY EXE23-048

Councillor Lyons, Portfolio Holder for Planning Policy, introduced the report which recommended to Council the conclusions of the 5 Year Review of the Core Strategy. The Executive was informed that there was a legislative requirement to review the Core Strategy every five years. The Council had produced its Core Strategy in 2012 and it was last reviewed in 2018. The Core Strategy provided the local strategic planning framework for the management of land uses in the Borough for the period up to 2027. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the review had demonstrated that all the policies of the Core Strategy remained up-to-date and fit for purpose, and were in general conformity with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). It was noted that a consultation with other statutory bodies had been undertaken, under the provisions of Duty to Cooperate guidance, and the comments raised would be taken into consideration when work began on a new Local Plan.

The Executive welcomed that green infrastructure was embedded in the Core Strategy and would feature strongly in the new Local Plan which would be required from 2027. Subject to Council approval, Officers would bring forward a timetable and work programme regarding the new Local Plan including stakeholder consultation. It was noted that the Masterplan work would be incorporated into the new Local Plan. The availability of office space in local centres and provision of three bedroom homes in the Borough were highlighted as areas of attention when considering the new Local Plan. The Planning Policy Team were thanked for their work on the review.

RECOMMENDED to Council

That (i) the conclusions of the 5 Year Review of the Core Strategy set out in the report be confirmed; and

(ii) Officers bring forward a timetable and associated outline of the work programme to produce a new Local Plan for the Borough of Woking.

Reason: To consider a 5 year review of the Core Strategy which determines whether the policies contained within it are up to date and effective, as required by the local plan regulations and the National Planning Policy Framework. The last review of the Core Strategy was undertaken in 2018. There is a legislative requirement to review a Core Strategy every five years and a review in 2023 was required. The Core Strategy sets out strategic planning policy for the Borough until 2027. A new Local Plan or possibly a new Core Strategy will be required from 2027.

8. VICTORIA ARCH - HOUSING INFRASTRUCTURE FUND (HIF) PROJECT EXE23-062

Following the decision of the Executive in July 2022 to undertake a fundamental review of the Housing infrastructure Fund (HIF) project due to concerns about the scale of the £53 million budget deficit, risks to the Council and the potential significant road closure, the Executive received a report which provided an update on the stages of the review and the position of the project. Councillor Forster, Portfolio Holder for Key Projects, explained the background to the HIF project, the concerns around the original large scheme, and the work done on alternative design options to reduce the overall costs of the project. The Portfolio Holder explained that the reviews undertaken by the Council had been presented to Homes England, however Homes England had confirmed it was not in a position to support any of the revised project proposals. Therefore, by mutual agreement, the Council and Homes England had agreed to terminate the HIF project. The Council would work with Homes England to reclaim costs spent by the Council.

It was noted that the Council would develop a plan for the Triangle site. It was acknowledged that development of the site would take time as the Council only owned 80% of the site. The need to bring forward housing on the site was highlighted. The possibility of street art on the hoardings around the Triangle site was suggested. The Executive heard that the Council would pursue discussions with the County Council for potential small-scale improvements to public realm and walking and cycling infrastructure on the south side of the bridge to enhance sustainable travel options. It was hoped that the County Council would bid for Active Surrey funding to enhance pedestrian and cycle access. Whilst it would be for the Council to determine the future use of the Triangle site as majority landowner, there would be some input from Surrey County Council as to possible future use of the site as determined by forthcoming proposals for the sustainable travel infrastructure.

The Executive welcomed that it would no longer be necessary to change the access to Day Aggregates, noting the concerns of residents to the proposals. Also, the likely harmful effect of a potential three year road closure on residents and the economic prosperity of the town which had been part of the previous Council administration's original HIF scheme.

Given the Council's serious financial position and the concerns discussed by Executive Members, the Executive supported the proposal to terminate the HIF project.

RESOLVED

- That (i) Woking Borough Council discuss with Homes England how and when the contract for the HIF project is terminated;
- (ii) costs incurred by Woking Borough Council are evidenced and presented to Homes England to request recovery;
- (iii) the two planning applications for the Goods Yard are withdrawn as there will be no new road or rail infrastructure provided;

And further to note:

- That (iv) Officers continue to seek refunds for advance payments to utility companies for diversion works they have not yet undertaken now that the infrastructure is not to be provided;
- (v) a plan for the Triangle site is developed;

(vi) the Council pursue discussions with Surrey County Council for the potential small-scale improvements to public realm and walking and cycling infrastructure on the south side of the bridge to enhance sustainable travel options; and

(vii) the Council pursue discussions with Network Rail for the potential visual improvements to Victoria Arch.

Reason: In order to terminate the contract with Homes England in light of there being no further funding available to deliver the road and rail infrastructure.

This document was published on Friday 6 October 2023 and the decisions within it will be implemented on Monday 16 October 2023, subject to call-in.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and ended at 8.22 pm.

Chairman: _____

Date: _____